



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Mercer Street Friends

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**MERCER STREET FRIENDS OPENED 2ND SCHOOL-BASED FOOD PANTRY
IN TRENTON DISTRICT**

*PART OF COMPREHENSIVE FAMILY RESOURCE CENTER FOR DR. MLK JR. MIDDLE SCHOOL
FAMILIES*

(full-sized image attached)



Photo caption: Mercer Street Friends cut the ribbon on the new Family Resource Center Food Pantry at Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Middle School, their second location in the Trenton District School. (pictured l to right) James Allen, Chief Operating Officer / Director of Food Bank, Mercer Street Friends; Bernie Flynn, CEO, Mercer Street Friends; Hope Grant, Assistant Superintendent of Secondary Education, Trenton Public Schools; Jennifer Williams, Trenton North Ward City Councilwoman; Reed Gusciora, Mayor City of Trenton; Xyana Thomas, middle school student; Victor Farnath, Principal, Dr. MLK Jr. Middle School; Monique Gamboa, Vice-Principal, Dr. MLK Jr. Middle School; Andre Reisner, middle school student; Teska Frisby, West Ward Councilwoman, City Council President; Dr. Jose M. Rodriguez, Assistant Superintendent of School Support, Trenton Public Schools; Bernadette Trapp, Director of Community Schools, Mercer Street Friends; Kayla Taylor, Coordinator of Family Resource Centers, Mercer Street Friends.

December 15, 2023 - Trenton, NJ: Mercer Street Friends, a nonprofit whose mission supports local families through comprehensive food and education programs, opened a Choice Food Pantry at Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Middle School, the second of three planned in the Trenton School District.

With the goal of expanding resources currently offered through the Mercer Street Friends [Community Schools](#) program, a school-based food pantry helps to address food gaps, nutrition concerns, and stress, for school children and their families.

A key differentiator for school-based pantries is that they are open to the entire school community – where everyone is encouraged to attend. People who might otherwise feel uneasy visiting a food pantry often feel more comfortable in a familiar school setting.

“By adding food pantries to our Community Schools, we are able to provide direct support to families,” said Bernie Flynn, Mercer Street Friends CEO. “Food insecurity is ongoing for school families in our area and convenience and consistency are critical. We aim to remove the barriers that cause families to have to make difficult choices around basic needs.”

Flynn says the central location of Dr. MLK Jr. Middle School makes it a natural hub for serving the school community. “We anticipate this being a busy pantry. We’ve taken the learnings from our resource center at Gregory and hit the ground running here at the middle school.”

The food pantry is part of the organization’s Family Resource Center concept located onsite in Community Schools offering families access to a multitude of resources conveniently located in their child’s school. Assistance with SNAP benefits (formerly known as food stamps), housing, immigration, legal, parenting, adult education, mental health are just some of the services. There is a dedicated technology room with laptops, printers, fax machines, and office supplies, all provided by Mercer Street Friends.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Middle School Principal, Victor Farnath, remarked on the significant milestone, “Through this initiative, we aim to eradicate food insecurity and ensure that no child or family goes hungry. We are truly grateful for Mercer Street Friends and the dedication they have to our school. They have been able to provide our students and parents access to counseling services, create attendance initiatives, and provide weekend food for all our students so they don’t go hungry.”

Hope Grant, Assistant Superintendent of Secondary Education, Trenton Public Schools expressed the district’s gratitude, “We are just so thankful for our partnership with Mercer Street Friends. This is a start of a movement to eradicate the thought, the feeling, and the words of ‘I’m hungry’ from any student.

Earlier this fall [Benjamin C. Gregory Elementary](#) was the first location for a school-based pantry.

“Within the past few months, the cost of food has soared making it increasingly difficult for many of our parents to feed their families. Thankfully, the food pantry has been able to stand in the gap,” said Gregory School Principal Jeanette Harris.

“Since its inception, we have been able to provide food for 53 families on a regular basis. That number does not include the 100 food baskets that were distributed for Thanksgiving. The food pantry has made a significant impact on our school community and has served a wonderful resource for our children and their families.”

The convenience of an in-school food pantry is a game-changer for families, especially for the Gregory school community whose closest supermarket is a 40-minute walk. Choice, frequency, and breadth of offerings are other benefits.

Bernadette Trapp, Director of Community Schools at Mercer Street Friends says her team consistently receives positive feedback on the “choice” model for the pantry. “Families appreciate the option to self-select from the pantry. Because parents are encouraged to visit weekly, we’ve noticed a trend that people only take what they need, when they need it, knowing they are welcome to return the following week.”

An unexpected, though not surprising, benefit of the school-based food pantry is kindness. “We are building a beautiful community of neighbors helping neighbors,” said Trapp. “We have teachers donating to the pantry and parents paying it forward by bringing formula and other items to pass along to anyone who might need it.”

Mercer Street Friends will open a third Family Resource Center in early 2024 at Luis Muñoz-Rivera Elementary.

Mercer Street Friends Community Schools initiative provides elementary level reading intervention programs and other educational opportunities in addition to social, emotional, physical, and mental health support to students and families year-round, including summer programming.

ABOUT MERCER STREET FRIENDS

As a Quaker-affiliated, nonsectarian 501(c)(3) organization, Mercer Street Friends is dedicated to nourishing minds and bodies, empowering families, and communities by providing comprehensive programs to address poverty and the physical and emotional trauma it creates for children, families, and the community. Their work is focused on three critical areas: food, families, and education. To learn more about Mercer Street Friends, visit mercerstreetfriends.org.

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